

RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF THE POETRY OF MRS. HEMANS.

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BY THE LATE B. B. THATCHER.

The Works of Mrs. Hemans, with a Memoir of her Life; by her Sister. Six volumes. Edinburgh: Wm. Blackwood; 1839.

THE decease of the accomplished and gifted lady whose works, *complete*, we are at once grieved and rejoiced to see here for the first time collected, has occasioned the expression of a deep feeling of affectionate and admiring sorrow, such as it has been the fortune of very few who have gone before her, and will be, we fear, of as few who may succeed her in her profession, to excite. It has been more, much more, than the customary compliment which the press or the public is wont to render to mere distinction. It was not alone the acknowledgment of admiration which high intellect, however used, commands. It was no cold decree of criticism, wrung from the reason of those who could not but approve, and were willing to do no more. An affectionate, as well as an admiring sorrow, we have said—admiring and

thankful. It came from the heart. It came from the hearts of those who feel as well as think; of the good, and of the gratified; of such as have been made, and know that they have been, happier and better—and happier because better—for what she wrote. A pure, unfailing fountain, was her poetry—by the way side of the pilgrim life which belongs to us all—a stoic, indeed, must the traveller be, who could drink of its gushing waters, and be bathed with its blessed “spray-drops,”* and yet leave, as he went again on his journey to be forgotten for ever.

Rejoiced, and grieved, we said. We grieve, not for the sealing of one of our own sources of intellectual and spiritual happiness and (we trust) improvement alone; not for ourselves even chiefly, and no

* Burial of an Emigrant's Child.

for herself at all; but that "the night hath lost a gem," a genial and a guiding flame for all who loved its silvery light, but now "no more is seen of mortal eye."* It has not left the skies unmissed, indeed, and *therefore* we rejoice. It will be remembered as the *lost Pleiad*, when even the bright band which lingers still where it was, shall almost have ceased to be noticed as the *living*.

There is evidence to this effect of what we have said in the appearance of the volumes before us, as in every sober symptom of renewed attention to the compositions of Mrs. Hemans, and of increased appreciation of their merit, which the occasion of her departure has produced. Such a popularity—the popularity of such productions, we mean, is a matter of just congratulation. It is a recognition of the virtue which is their vital principle. It confirms anew, and with a force proportioned to the brilliancy of the reputation, the old theory of the value and interest of *truth*, in literature, and in poetry, as much as in religion, and in life. It proves that honesty is the best policy, in the one department as well as in the other; the honesty of the simplicity of nature;—inasmuch as it goes to show that even the taste of the reading community at large, no less than the conscience of all men, may be relied on for the approval of "whatsoever things are lovely," if they be but worthily set forth. *This* they must be, of course, and this is enough. It is to accomplish the peculiar duty, and to attain the highest honours of the poet. This is the essence of the "divine delightfulness," (as Sydney calls it,) of his noble art. It is to make fervent the disposition to do what philosophy teaches to be desirable, and religion feels to be right. It is to entice "the ardent will" onward and further on, "as if your journey should be through a fair vineyard, at the first giving you a cluster of grapes, that full of that taste you may long to pass further."† It is to fill the soul with the rapturous love of that glorious beauty of immortal goodness, whereof even Plato and Tully have said, that they who could *see* it would need no more;‡ and which to *see*, demands in him who leads her gently forward—as an eastern bride, betrothed, but yet unknown—no antic attitudes of studied grace—no "wreathed smiles—no opulent drapery, nor blazing ornaments, nor wreaths of words of praise;—but only to *unveil*.

We may be deemed enthusiastic by some; not, perhaps for this estimate of the loveliness of virtue, as it is, or of the dignity of the poet's craft as it should be; but for the application of it to the case before us. Such, however, at such hazard, must we venture to pronounce in the outset the crowning praise of Mrs. Hemans. She has made poetry, as it was meant to be, the Priestess of Religion. These volumes render it evident how deeply she came to feel, in her own spirit, that it was so. Her genius was hallowed at length with the holy waters of faith, and love, and prayer. She realized with Milton, that "these abilities are of power to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and public civility; to allay the perturbation of the mind, and set the affections in right tune; to celebrate in glorious and lofty hymns the throne and equipage of God's almightiness, and what he works and what he suffers to be wrought, with high providence in his church; and lastly, that whatsoever in religion is holy

and sublime, in virtue amiable or grave, whatsoever hath passion or admiration in all the changes of that which is called fortune from without, or the wily subtleties and refluxes of man's thoughts from within, all these things, with a solid and treatable smoothness, to paint out and describe," such, apparently, was the model which she set before her. It was, at all events, the theory which she more and more matured in conception, and disclosed in practice, as she wrote; and no writings can be cited more pertinently, or more plentifully, than her own, as an argument for correctness. Could it have been a mere instinct that prompted her to such a course—an intellectual instinct, more than a spiritually cultivated study—her success is still what it is. The encouragement for those who emulate her fame should be greater; for it is at least a new instance to prove, that, as an innate *moral* sense in the heathen hearts is "a law unto themselves," so is the sincere conscience (so to speak) of mere intellect—the innate taste—enough alone to guide it to the choice of "the sweet food of sweetly-uttered knowledge."**

In truth, however, there is not only no reason to doubt the conscientious, well-elaborated, religious purpose of the poetry of Mrs. Hemans—alluding more particularly always to her latest—but abundance of proof that her notions of the subject were much the same with those of Milton, which we have cited. She applied the theory, indeed, in a different department of themes; to one for which her genius was best suited—not to say better suited than his. She applied it in fact to themes, where he applied it to a theme. She did in detail, what he did upon a greater scale. She wrote as a woman should, where he wrote as a man. If his leading principle was (as Haslett says) *faith*, hers was *love*;—a Christian faith and love. Her sphere was domestic; his, epic. She dealt with the affections of individuals, and he with the attributes of the race. She was content with a "*Thought*" of that "*Paradise*" which was lost and regained for him:—her home was her *Paradise*. His was an ambition to be immortalized in that admiration of after days "whereof" even then

"All Europe rang from side to side;"

And to build, though by the labour of a life time, one grand colossal monument, whose front should be high in heaven, and its feet resting at once on the future and the past;—this was his "*noble task*." For this he lived, for this he fell "o'erplied."†† Her ambition was to be remembered by the *heart*. She poured forth feelings of her own, that, like the wandering dove of old, would roam the world around, to find a shelter in one human breast. 'This, for her, was to make happier and to be so; and further than this, it was enough for her, in the language of her own lonely student,

—————"To add but one
To those refulgent steps, all undefiled,
Which glorious minds have piled
Through bright, self offering, earnest, child-like, love,
For mounting to thy throne!
And let my soul upborne
On wings of inner morn,
Find in *illuminated secrecy*, the sense
Of that blest work, its own high recompence."

* The *Lost Pleiad*.

† Defence of Poetry

* Sydney.

† See sonnet on his blindness.

"If thou hast made,"—she says again,

"If thou hast made,
Like the winged seed, the breathings of thy thought,
And by the swift winds bid them be conveyed
To lands of other lays, and there become
Native as early melodies of home;—
O bless thee, O my God!"

This is a passage of the "Poet's Dying Hymn," one of the most characteristic and beautiful of her productions, though, like a multitude more, collected in the edition of her poems before us, scarcely known in this country hitherto, excepting to a few persons perhaps through the medium of some foreign magazine.* The Scenes and Hymns of Life, with which it appeared in an Edinburgh edition of Blackwood, (in 1834) are full throughout of the same spirit. To that collection also was attached a Preface of her own, one of the existing specimens of her prose, chiefly explanatory, but explicitly so, of her scheme of *enlarging the sphere of Religious Poetry, by associating with it themes more of the emotions, the affections, and even the purer imaginative enjoyments of daily life, than have been hitherto admitted within the hallowed circle.* "I have sought," she continues, "to represent that spirit as penetrating the gloom of the prison and the death-bed, bearing 'healing on its wings,' to the agony of parting love—strengthening the heart of the way-farer for perils in the wilderness—gladdening the domestic walk through field and woodland—and springing to life in the soul of childhood, along with its earliest rejoicing perceptions of natural beauty." Such is her own exposition of her poetical theory. It is for others to judge how successfully she has exemplified it in practice. In her own department, we think she has done it with greater effect than any other writer. A selection of her compositions might be made—and a most precious one it would be—so full of sketches of the experience of the heart, in all the positions and phases incident to the various domestic relations, which are worthy of the labour of such description—and so livingly and minutely true—so imbued with nature, made wise by suffering—so applicable in all things to hundreds of cases which occur every day—as to form almost a complete manual for the use of any household, exposed, as all are, as well to numberless fluctuations of fortune which cannot be foreseen, as to the changes and trials common to humanity at large. We have had occasion, and so doubtless have most of our readers, to see the character of these sketches, such as we now describe it, tested, and testified to, by the infallible judgment of those to whose circumstances and feelings they were severally applicable. The wife, and the widow, alike—the woman, and the girl—the mother—the orphan—the blest and the afflicted—rejoicing and weary spirits in every mood of joy and gloom—but most of all, the host of "nameless martyrs"—

"The thousands that, uncheered by praise,
Have made one offering of their days;—
The meekly noble hearts,
Of whose abode
Midst her green vallies, earth retains no trace,
Save a flower springing from their burial sods,
A shado of sadness on some kindred face,
A dim and vacant place
In some sweet home—"

* We notice that the writer speaks herself of this fine poem, as in her own opinion one of her best.

The mighty multitude of "*most loved*" unknown—these, all these, are they whom she has written of, and written for. Their sympathies have given shelter to her thoughts. Their tears have been her praise.

And an influence worth having is this; no noisy acclamation at the brilliant meteor of a moment; no hollow outcry of flattered appetite and passion; no cold approval of the sluggishly judicious;—but the warm verdict, the remembrance, the love, the blessing of those whose bosoms *feel* the fame (if fame it is) she coveted, and richly won.

Think, then, of such an influence, wielded, as Mrs. Hemans has wielded hers, and as her works will, as long as they continue to be read; an influence so sanctified throughout by a religious spirit, a spirit of encouragement, faith, gratitude, and prayer; and holy aspiration: so stirring to all virtue that may be in its majestic eulogies of that which has been; so ennobling in its development of the powers of doing and enduring which lie latent in every human breast.

This estimate of her poetry will not be universally adopted, we know, as a just one. By some, for various reasons, it will be considered to imply an extravagant appreciation of a subordinate claim to praise, and to the disparagement of others, such *they* deem to be of primary poetical importance. With mere critics, however, we will not contend. We are among those who take for granted that a true and pure religious spirit is the first merit of poetry; and a genuine religious influence, its first title to fame. Other qualifications we do not overlook. We do not forget the necessity of sense, science, taste, talent, tact—of the knowledge of the world—of an intimacy with external nature—of fine sensibility to every source of emotion—of the power of abstraction, and of application withal—of a mind, generally as well as professionally, or particularly, informed, so as to be no less justly balanced, than richly filled;—of all the fitness, in a word, for this divine art (as in its right estate we judge it to have been well considered) which is, or ought to be, the result of all opportunities, and all faculties to make the best of them, included in the general idea of a suitable *education*, added to a *genius* for the work. This much, whatever it include, is implied when we speak of religion as the soul of poetry. Poetry it must be to begin with. There must be a body for a soul to be breathed into it, as the breath of life; and whatsoever, therefore, may be indispensable to the body of poetry, is presumed. In other words, other things being equal—sensibility, talents, accomplishments, and all else that comes under the consideration, not only of style but of poetry as a mere art—that poetry we should pronounce at once the worthiest and the likeliest to live, which has in it the superadded inspiration of pure religion.

By all this we do not mean a *creed*. We are not sure that many of our readers, who may admit Mrs. Hemans' productions as much as we do, will agree with us in this particular. They may not know, indeed, what her creed was; these may never have thought them, nevertheless, that they remain both thus ignorant, and thus unaware of their ignorance: and yet, when the circumstance is pointed out, they may be of opinion that it suggests a serious objection to this poetry which they ought to have thought of before. Peradventure they will presently cast about, to see if the fault is their own, or hers. They will turn over the leaves of these elegant volumes, with

the hope, if not the expectation of deciding a point, which somehow or other escaped them on the former perusals. Let them do so. It is just what we should ask of them; and we appeal to them for the result of the investigation, as the best proof of what we have said, and at the same time no inappropriate illustration of what we intend by a true and pure religious spirit. Especially let them re-examine the Forest Sanctuary;—purely a religious poem from beginning to end; the hero an apostate Catholic, and the heroine, his wife, a woman who loved him despite his recreancy, and mourned over him with a torturing

"Sorrow of affection's eye,
Fixing its meekness on the spirit's core,
Deeper, and teaching more of agony,
May pierce, than many swords;"

One of the most magnificent illustrations, by the way, of the power of a religious principle.

"The still small voice, against the might of suffering love," which man's imagination has devised, or woman's either—the most perfect, indeed the most sublimely eloquent, which we remember to have read. She, too, was not all loveliness and love, alone, but a martyr for her faith, like him;—weeping over him, yet flying with him to the ends of the earth (from the persecution of her own sect:)—watching the southern cross at sea, by his side, when yet once more

"She sang
Her own soft Ora Mater!—and the sound
Was even like love's farewell—so mournfully profound;"

and then dying in his arms, "her head against his bursting heart!" Oh! what a picture is this of mingled love and faith, all powerful both, and both triumphant to the end. Such, again, is the high office of poetry. Such is religious poetry. Yet who we ask inquires for the creed of the writer? Who can determine it from the whole of that splendid poem, all filled as it is with a spiritual enthusiasm that glows in every line? Who, from the rest of her compositions, indisputably religious? Not one, of all that have read them—and will read them now, though dust be in the heart that gave them birth—in many a proud hall, and by many a humble fireside, will read them with the bliss of bursting tears, and rise from them to thank God for the new light to see, and the fresh strength to suffer, which these have given them.

No one will infer, we hope, from these remarks, that we suppose Mrs. Hemans to have laboured to conceal her religious belief, or that she was in any degree or instance, without one. The fact is well understood to have been otherwise. She was most decided, and fervent in her faith; most conscientiously industrious also to be enlightened. Neither are we willing to be held responsible for the false and miserable doctrine that there is any incongruity between a religious system, and a religious spirit; or between both and the spirit of poetry. There is no need of disparaging belief, to promote feeling. The best of feeling, no less for poetical than for religious purpose, is founded expressly upon belief;—the more rational, distinct, and (of course) correct, the better. We should argue no more for poetry, than we should for liberality—and for such the like reasons—from the want of such a belief, or from its vagueness. The more intelligent a mind is, the more, for the most

part, it will appreciate the intelligence of other minds; and that is liberality. So, the more thoroughly principled and settled it is in its faith on particular subjects—the less stirred and perturbed it is with the agitation of distrust, dissatisfaction, anxiety, and all the train which ignorance brings in—the less can it be open, as the poetical mind essentially must be, to the free operation of all influences and impulses, from without and within, and the less ready and able for an energetic exercise of its active powers. Quintillian holds, even in his heathenism, that an orator must be a *good* man;—meaning, we suppose, a man of sincere principle, and set purpose. The poet must be so, much more. He must be so in the Christian sense. He must believe, that he may feel as he should; he must believe, and be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him, that he may be free to feel and free to think, and act, knowing why and wherefore; and still more—like the orator—that he may possess the power over other minds which nothing but settled sincerity, and the unmistakeable marks of it—can possibly impart. The world are too wise to be permanently deceived by written affectation, any more than spoken: and though deceived, they will not be moved. A chief secret of the success of Mrs. Hemans is that she has impressed her readers with a *conviction*—if it can be called such, which has been so much the result of sympathy rather than reflection—a conviction of her sincerity. Her earnestness, her clearness, her self-possession, her confident simplicity, her self-evident truth, but above all that indefinable countenance of genius and enthusiasm—religious, divine enthusiasm—have given her access to the heart. No such qualities could she have shown or had, but upon the foundation of a Christian conscientiousness, laborious belief. In regard to the circumstance that it cannot be determined, doctrinally from her poems—as we have incidentally mentioned—it amounts to saying, simply, that while her heart, and her poetry—and the one because the other, for her poetry is but her heart in print—are deeply imbued with a true religious spirit, she has treated no subjects which required a development of articles of doctrinal belief, or an allusion to them, in express terms. Her walk has been over common ground—the ground of the affections—the little circular world of which a woman's heart is the centre; and when, venturing beyond these modest limits of her "Daily Paths," her thoughts "all wind and winged," soared upward till the "world in open air," lay far beneath, so

—"the abyss of time oerswept
As birds the ocean foam"—

What sought they then—those restless pilgrims of the soul—from their far flight, by land and sea? Fair gleams allured them down to that

"bright battle-clime
Where laurel boughs make dim the Grecian streams
And reeds are whispering of *heroic themes*
By temples of old time:
And then by 'forests old and dim' they paused
'Where o'er the leaves dread magic seems to brood,
And sometimes on the haunted solitude
Rises the pilgrim's hymn:'
And ancient halls in northern skies
'Where banners thrilled of yore, where harp strings rung,
But grass waves now o'er those who fought and sung.'

Gave refuge to the 'wandering swarm. And then
they soared again, "Go seek," she says:

"Go seek the *martyr's grave*,
Midst the old mountains, and the desert vast,
Or through the ruined cities of the past,
Follow the *wise and brave*!"

"Go, visit *cell* and *shrine*,
Where woman hath endured! through wrong, through scorn,
Uncheered by fame, yet silently upborne,

By promptings more divine!"

And further yet—

"Go, shoot the gulf of death!

Track the pure spirit where no chain can bind,
Where the heart's boundless love its rest may find,
Where the storm sends no breath!"

Yea—

"Higher, and yet more high!
Shake off the cumbering chain which earth would lay
On your victorious wings—mount—mount—*your way*
Is through eternity!"

And this was *her* way. It was that of the highest
order of poetry, as we esteem it, fulfilling its best
office and its own.

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